

James Madison to Thomas Jefferson, March 27, 1780. Transcription: The Writings of James Madison, ed. Gaillard Hunt. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1900-1910.

TO THOMAS JEFFERSON.¹

1 Then Governor of Virginia. The letter is from the Madison papers (1840). It marks the beginning of the correspondence with Jefferson.

Philadelphia, March 27, 1780.

Dear Sir, —Nothing under the title of news has occurred since I wrote last week by express, except that the enemy on the first of March remained in the neighbourhood of Charleston, in the same posture as when the preceding account came away. From the best intelligence from that quarter, there seems to be great encouragement to hope that Clinton's operations will be again frustrated. Our great apprehensions at present flow from a very different quarter. Among the various conjunctures of alarm and distress which have arisen in the course of the Revolution, it is with pain I affirm to you, sir, that no one can be singled out more truly critical than the present. Our army threatened with an immediate alternative of disbanding or living on free quarter; the public treasury empty; public credit exhausted, nay the private credit of purchasing agents employed, I am told, as far as it will bear; Congress complaining of the extortion of the people; the people of the improvidence of Congress; and the army of both; our affairs requiring the most mature and systematic measures, and the urgency of occasions admitting only of temporizing expedients, and these expedients generating new difficulties; Congress recommending plans to the several States for execution, and the States separately rejudging the expediency of such plans,

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whereby the same distrust of concurrent exertions that has damped the ardor of patriotic individuals must produce the same effect among the States themselves; an old system of finance discarded as incompetent to our necessities, an untried and precarious one substituted, and a total stagnation in prospect between the end of the former and the operation of the latter. These are the outlines of the picture of our public situation. I leave it to your own imagination to fill them up. Believe me, sir, as things now stand, if the States do not vigorously proceed in collecting the old money, and establishing funds for the credit of the new, that we are undone; and let them be ever so expeditious in doing this, still the intermediate distress to our army, and hindrance to public affairs, are a subject of melancholy reflection. General Washington writes that a failure of bread has already commenced in the army; and that, for any thing he sees, it must unavoidably increase. Meat they have only for a short season; and as the whole dependence is on provisions now to be procured, without a shilling for the purpose, and without credit for a shilling, I look forward with the most pungent apprehensions. It will be attempted, I believe, to purchase a few supplies with loan-office certificates; but whether they will be received is perhaps far from being certain; and if received will certainly be a most expensive and ruinous expedient. It is not without some reluctance I trust this information

to a conveyance by post, but I know of no better at present, and I conceive it to be absolutely necessary to be known to those who are most able and zealous to contribute to the public relief.